

LIVING WITH OPEN PLAN

A 20 month follow up on the Meredith Connell office move



**WELLBEING & PERFORMANCE
RESEARCH GROUP**

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A report prepared for Meredith Connell – The Law Firm

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Executive Summary

In 2016, six months after Meredith Connell moved to purpose-built premises, researchers from AUT's Management Department spent time in their new open-plan office. A brief staff survey was conducted and, in addition, 24 employees (legal and corporate services staff) were interviewed. In total, data were collected from 99 employees (representing 56% of the 177 staff). The sample was representative of the firm with 37% being corporate services and 63% lawyers. Interview and survey questions focused on employees' work experiences in both the old and new space, as well as the change process. Fourteen months later (20 months post move) staff responded to a follow-up survey online. At time two (February-March 2018) data were collected from 70 employees (representing 32% of the 220 staff). The questions focused entirely on employees' experience in, and perception of, the office space.

Key findings Time 1: The overwhelming majority of staff reported being very satisfied with their new offices. High collaboration and consultation in decision-making meant most employees were also positive about the change process. An egalitarian allocation of desks, where every staff member, including partners in the firm, received similar spaces also facilitated acceptance of the move. The thoughtfully designed space has very high indoor environment quality, with abundant natural light, over 1,300 plants, "green walls", and acoustic quietening throughout. There are numerous small breakout rooms and an inviting library with strict silence norms to facilitate concentrated work. At this time the lunch room was a particular highlight for many staff.

Key findings Time 2: Overall the evaluation of the offices remained very positive with respondents, on average, rating the overall offices at 8.6/10, and 7.6/10 for their own space. A complaint at time one was the relative lack of storage space. At time two, while storage was a concern for many, the perceived "crowding" of desks and the need for more collab rooms emerged as a key theme in the responses. In terms of décor, the natural light and the numerous plants are particularly appreciated. Respondents were almost unanimous in reporting that the office layout facilitated positive working relationships with others. The impact that the office layout had on perceived productivity was somewhat more mixed with 44% of respondents reporting a decrease in productivity, 21% an improvement and the remainder reporting no or minimal impact.

Items on the current survey included the following topics:

- Aspects of the new office that were particularly liked and/or disliked
- The impact on work and collegial relationships and productivity
- What people would like to see changed if possible

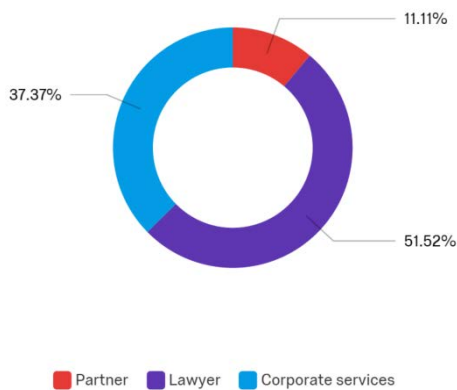
Note: The complete survey is included later in this document for reference.

Method

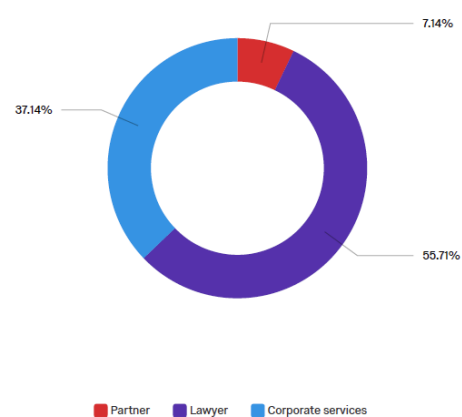
At time one, 24 in-depth interviews with Meredith Connell employees were conducted, along with an online survey was developed with input from Kylie Mooney (COO), who viewed a preliminary draft. Employees linked to the survey through Qualtrics survey software which maintains complete anonymity; data were downloaded and analysed by the researchers (no one else had access to individual responses). At time two, the online survey focused on aspects of the physical environment and employee's experience of work in the open plan space.

Respondents

At time two the sample was adequately representative of the employees of Meredith Connell, 74% were female (only slightly more than the proportion of female staff). For 63% of the respondents, the open plan space was their only experience of Meredith Connell, having joined the firm after the move. The proportion of corporate services and legal staff remained representative of the organisation.



Time 1: Survey respondents by role



Time 2: Survey respondents by role

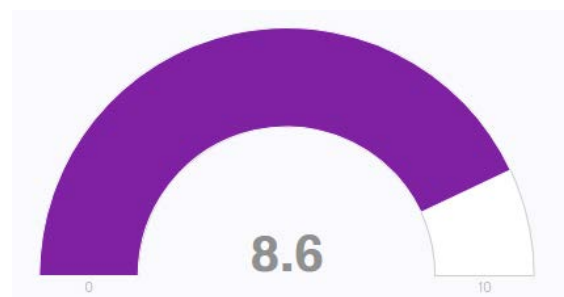
Responses to survey/interview

Below, each aspect of the survey will be discussed, with supporting quotes from the online surveys

How much do you like the MC offices?



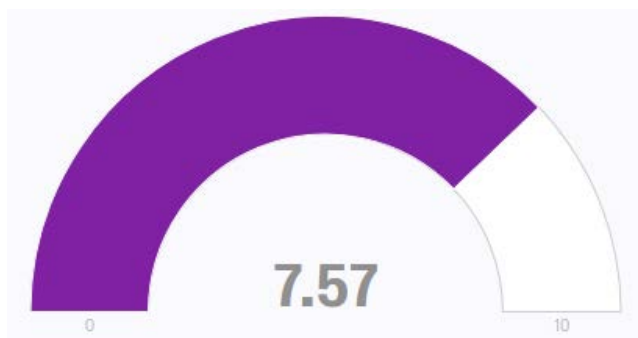
Time 1: Evaluation of MC Offices in general



Time 2: Evaluation of MC Offices in general

The response to the question focusing on the general attitude towards the new office space was, overall, very positive at both time 1 and time 2 with the average response being 8.31 and 8.6 respectively (on a scale of 1-10).

A question asked at time 2, which was not asked at time 1 was how much employees liked their own work space (as opposed to the MC offices in general). This resulted in an average score of 7.57 out of 10. Although slightly less than the score for the whole environment, this still indicates a positive evaluation of the work space.



Time 2: Evaluation of employees own work space

What aspects of the office space or facilities do you especially like?

As well as using the scale, respondents were given the opportunity to identify aspects of the space they especially appreciated. At time two, aspects of the offices in general that MC staff liked were the fact that there were a variety of spaces such as the collab room and the library (mentioned 23 times), the plants (20), general aesthetics such as natural light and the décor (16), the kitchen and reception area (16), and the opportunity for increased interactions with others (8). Less often identified were the end of trip facilities (3), the workstations features such as dual screens and sit to stand desks (4), and hydration stations / sparkling water (4). Many respondents were quite effusive in their description of the spaces and features of the open plan offices, for example,

- *I love the use of space - the collab rooms are such a good idea and I don't know what we'd do without them. Having the forethought to have collab rooms in an open plan space is genius. And the fact they are constantly being used is testament to that.*
- *Modern, open and bright. It is good to be able to hear what is going on.*
- *I love the open plan. Because I still get all my work done I quite enjoy being able to stop for 5 or 10 minutes to have a quick friendly chat with someone near me and then get back into it. It creates a nice environment to work in.*
- *Social and interactive being in open plan, having plants around helps when in office long hours.*
- *Greenery and natural light is great. Shared spaces like the overbridge are great for some variety when you want to sit somewhere else to work for a bit the plants and ease of talking to colleagues.*
- *I love the greenery, it feeds my soul! I also love the extra lightness & feeling of fresher air.*

How high (typically) is your level of distraction while at your desk?

In response to the level of distraction experienced by employees, at time 1 and time 2 the average response was 4.83 and 5.14 respectively. Considering how close colleagues are to one another and the fact that there are no solid walls or screens, this is a positive result and, though very slightly higher at time two, the level of distraction has remained relatively stable over time. Although in time two, distraction was often mentioned in various contexts, several of these instances were respondents talking about managing their distractions, such as:

- *It can be distracting but I've worked in open plan offices in the UK, Aussie and NZ and this is probably the least distracting of the lot thanks to the dividers, file cupboards between each area, plants and availability of Co-Lab rooms.*
- *I do tend to get quite distracted with things going on around me. There are the collab rooms or headphones I can use if I have lots of work to do.*
- *I wear headphones at my desk to ensure I don't get distracted*

Others wrote of the distractions as a “necessary evil” such as:

- *The only negative impact is distractions from people coming in and out of our little pod. It positively impacts my productivity because it's much easier to ask questions and get my work done without needing to wait for answers.*
- *There are more distractions but it has also meant there are more opportunities to interact with colleagues in an informal way throughout the day. It makes me closer with my team-mates; gives a collegial atmosphere.*

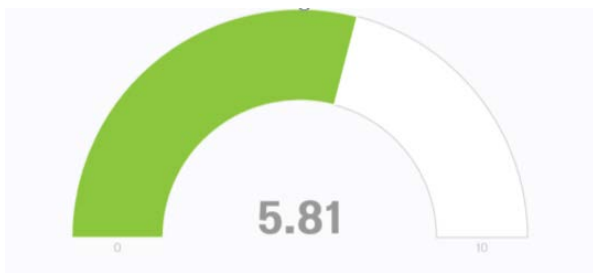


Some indicative quotes about distraction from respondents at time two are below:

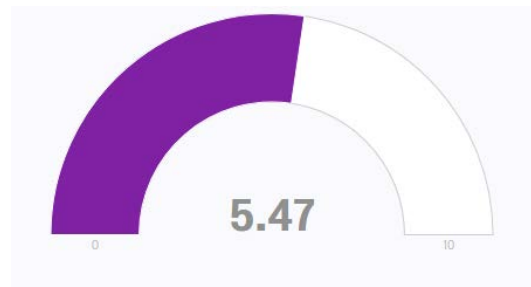
- *It can be draining and distracting at times*
- *A degree of mental effort goes into excluding surrounding conversations & distractions, which can be added stress when very busy. Often people who should use the collab rooms for conversations, fail to do so.*
- *Too many distractions*
- *Being completely open plan makes it more distracting, collab rooms often all full*

How satisfied are you with the amount of privacy you have at your desk?

Privacy remained an issue for some, but by no means all, staff members. In general, it seems most employees were not dissatisfied with the lack of privacy, with the response at time two averaging 5.47 on a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). Considering that the open plan environment provides very little privacy at all, the consistent satisfaction with this aspect of the open plan environment is acceptable.



Time 1: Satisfaction with privacy



Time 2: Satisfaction with privacy

While some respondents wished for more privacy,

- *I really struggle with the lack of privacy and space sometimes*
- *[I dislike] The level of noise and lack of privacy*
- *[I would alter] more privacy for the co-lab rooms*

...there were those felt being that visible nearby others actually improved productivity such as:

- *I don't really need privacy but having everyone around me keeps me working more consistently*
- *I do get distracted if people around me are talking. But knowing that other people can see what I am doing also motivates me to be productive.*

Interestingly this same phenomena could also be evaluated quite negatively

- *Now with open space it feels more like a fish bowl and I have noticed more subtle pressure to stay later even if you don't technically need to - based on looks some seniors, even from entirely different teams, give you.*

Other respondents felt the office did, in fact, offer sufficient privacy, for example,

- *The desk lay/out/plants afford privacy*

How has the new office impacted your work or your collegial relationships (if it has)?

This survey question was phrased to allow both positive and negative responses; the facilitation of relationships vs. the possible negative impact it could have.

Research generally predicts diminished collegiality when workers are afforded little privacy along with relatively more distractions and intense social presence of others. However 86% of respondents answering this question felt that the office layout had a positive impact of collegiality, the remainder either did not answer this question or felt that it had not had an impact. None of the respondents indicated that it had negatively impacted their collegial relationships.

This is a great outcome. It seems that in this office the careful layout, privacy barriers, plants and the availability of breakout spaces, along with a positive organisational culture, has mitigated the negative social outcomes often associated with open plan working.

Some indicative responses at time two include:

- *For the better - it's so nice to form friendships with the people around me - makes the working day so enjoyable!*
- *Improved them, see more people outside of my team that I otherwise would*

- *I feel more connected to my team*
- *It makes it very easy to communicate with someone informally or briefly. The break out rooms are ideal for longer or more private chats. It really facilitates a variety of different communication styles*

It is worth noting that there were a few slightly more equivocal responses such as:

- *More interaction across teams, particularly in the common space. Ironically, probably less interaction within our team*
- *I feel the people in 'pods' have developed a greater degree of comradeship, which is good for them. As I'm not in a pod, it's easy to feel excluded (ie casual conversations)*
- *Harder to focus, but more collegial*

A response to the question about what is disliked adds to this section however, this person being one of the few who felt that close by others reduced conversation in their team.

- *Counter-intuitively, the open plan set up has reduced conversations within my team. If there's a work conversation we tend to use a collab room or the air bridge. Otherwise, we all work quietly at our desks to avoid distracting others. This reduces the general chat among the team. That obviously increases productivity in the short term but I think it decreases team cohesion overall.*

How does the open plan office design impact your productivity (if it does)?

The impact that the office layout had on perceived productivity was quite varied with 44% of respondents reporting a decrease in productivity, 21% an improvement and the remainder reporting no or minimal impact with responses such as,

- *It doesn't really impact my productivity. I get just the same amount of work done.*
- *No apparent impact*

For those who felt that the open plan office design generally made them more productive, there were two clear themes; those whose productivity was improved by the increased ease with which they could access information and collaborate, e.g.,

- *It positively impacts my productivity because it's much easier to ask questions and get my work done without needing to wait for answers.*
- *Keeps the communication open and more approachable*

...and those who were more productive because they felt monitored by others, e.g.,

- *... having everyone around me keeps me working more consistently.*
- *... knowing that other people can see what I am doing also motivates me to be productive.*
- *We're more visible to each other, so more accountable for our whereabouts and what we are doing with our time.*
- *I found I am more responsible because I am more accountable for my actions.*
- *Overall positive - can always be seen, so always working unless nobody is around*

In addition, there were several equivocal responses to this question from respondents cognizant of both the positive and negative outcomes of open plan work, e.g.,

- *It possibly makes me less productive but more social*
- *Can be hard to concentrate with the interruptions, but on the other hand it's good to keep open communication.*

Many responses focused not so much on the impact on productivity, but rather on strategies to ensure that they remained productive in spite of potential distraction from nearby others.

- *It definitely reduces [productivity] but not as much as when I started - it has taken me a while to figure out how to use the different types of work spaces and to tune out the distractions*
- *I find it slightly harder to concentrate whilst at my desk - but not if I use the collab rooms*
- *I wear headphones at my desk to ensure I don't get distracted*

What aspects of the office space or facilities do you dislike / would like to see changed?

Regarding what respondents reported disliking about the office; at time two, by far the most common complaint was the lack of space and rooms.

- *Not enough collab rooms*
- *Not always a room for meetings*
- *The lack of adequate storage & desk space is frustrating... insufficient space by the printers to collate papers*
- *There isn't enough room in the office*

Related to this, the density of desks was also a grievance, e.g.,

- *I dislike that desks are being packed into every spare space, including hallways, because there isn't enough room in the office.*
- *More desks are being squeezed in around the office now where once there was space.*
- *I don't like how more desks have been crammed into spaces, it looks overcrowded and I wouldn't want to sit there personally.*

In addition, there are some who perceived the (previously very egalitarian) allocation of space and desks to now be less fair with several comments on the equity of the allocation of space, such as,

- *I don't like how exposed certain desks are to those walking past, and I don't like how some desks are quite squished while other desks are more spaced out, and certain people get a lot of spare space around them, yet they're the ones who also make the decision to pack desks tighter in certain spaces.*
- *I don't like that some team areas are more squished in than others. I don't know how you would solve that but yeah it just seems slightly unfair at times.*

Unsurprisingly this was also the key theme in the answers to the question regarding what respondent would like to see changed. At time one most respondents (around 80%), either said “nothing”, entered NA, or suggested just one small aspect of the new offices that they found challenging. At time two, 60% of respondents responded to this question, and the most common aspect identified as something they would like changed was space and crowding. Wanting either more collab / meeting rooms or more space / storage (or both) was mentioned by 62% of people answering this question at time two. For example:

- *More desk and storage space*
- *More quiet rooms*
- *More breakout spaces*
- *It would be preferable to have two kitchens, not just one. It becomes extremely busy during the morning and at lunchtime, have to keep pushing your way through people or interrupting them just to get to the things you need, high level of noise (not a relaxing break!)*

At time one, very few respondents mentioned space or crowding as an aspect of the offices they disliked. In the intervening 14 months, 16 extra desks have been added to the space and the total number of staff increased from 177 to 220 (a 25% increase). Perhaps understandably, the sense of being “crowded” and of wanting more space has intensified.

The other key criticism was the level of distraction (discussed previously). Privacy however, seems to be far less of an issue than space or distractions with only a few respondents identifying this as an issue. Responses at time two include:

- *[I dislike] that people can see my screen behind my back.*
- *The client facing parts are ill thought out - there aren't enough external meeting rooms to keep up with demand, clients feel awkward discussing confidential matters in the cafe area in reception and it is awkward to bring them into the internal part of the floor for meeting*

A lack of adherence to norms or “rules” was also noted by several respondents in time one and this theme was still evident in the time two data collection with comments such as,

- *Enforcement of meeting room policy - i.e. anything in there at end of day is cleared out.*
- *Less mess around other people's workstations.*
- *Less camping in collab rooms.*

Interestingly, sticking to “rules” around collab room use seems to be an issue for far fewer people in the second data collection compared to earlier. On the other hand, significantly more respondents would like to see more rooms. Either MC staff are, by and large, sticking to the social norms around room use or perhaps there has been a perception shift, meaning more employees find it acceptable to extend their use of the room and “camp out”, and would rather simply have more rooms and therefore the opportunity to do so, such as the person below,

- *I seldom work at my desk now. I spend most of my days in collab rooms or the library. I find it very difficult to focus.*

Other, less frequent grievances included the lifts (slow), the bathrooms, dying plants, insects (from the plants), noisy kitchen, the loss of the rooftop terrace, the bright wallpaper in the collab rooms (*headache inducing*), and the art.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the open plan office continues to work well for most Meredith Connell employees.

Respondents generally evaluate the space very positively and almost all enjoy the ambience, decor, and contact with fellow employees that the office provides.

It was noted in our first report that, if the number of employees housed in the existing space were to increase significantly with the growth of the firm, issues of crowding, privacy and distraction will likely become salient to more staff members; and this has indeed happened. A key difference between time one and two was dissatisfaction with amount of space and a lack of the (now very desirable) collab rooms. As the occupancy has increased, there seem to be some staff members using these rooms for extended periods, along with frustration at the fact that they are often all occupied. Others seems to have effectively utilised strategies for dealing with the distractions such as headphones and strategic use of the different spaces available.

Some recommendations are listed below:

- Encourage remote working. Not all roles are suited for this but, if a portion of the staff work from home regularly, this may ease pressure on the collab rooms and the feeling of crowding
- Ensure that there is equity in the amount of space assigned to the various “pods” or teams.
- With regard to behavioural norms around noise and the use of breakout rooms; reminders could be sent to staff to be mindful of speaking too loudly or too long in the earshot of others, and that rooms should not be used for extended periods.

In sum, there has been excellent planning and design in the open plan and break out spaces for employees demonstrating best practice. In spite of this, the number of people within the space might necessitate changes in how the spaces are used, booked, or set up.

Survey (Time 2)

Is your role...

- Partner
- Lawyer
- Corporate services

Gender

- Male
- Female

Age

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- over 55

How long have you worked at the Meredith Connell Graham St offices?

Answer questions below thinking about your office move and your experience in the new Graham St office:

- How much do you like your current work space? (1 = not at all, 10 = love it)
- How much do you like the offices in general? (1 = not at all, 10 = love it)
- How satisfied are you with the amount of privacy you have at your desk? (1 = not at all, 10 = extremely satisfied)
- How high (typically) is your level of distraction while at your desk? (1 = not at all, 10 = extremely distracted)

How has the new office impacted your work or your collegial relationships (if it has)?

How does the open plan office design impact your productivity (if it does)?

What aspects of the new office space or facilities do you especially like?

What aspects of the new office space or facilities do you dislike?

If you could alter any aspects of your office space what would they be?